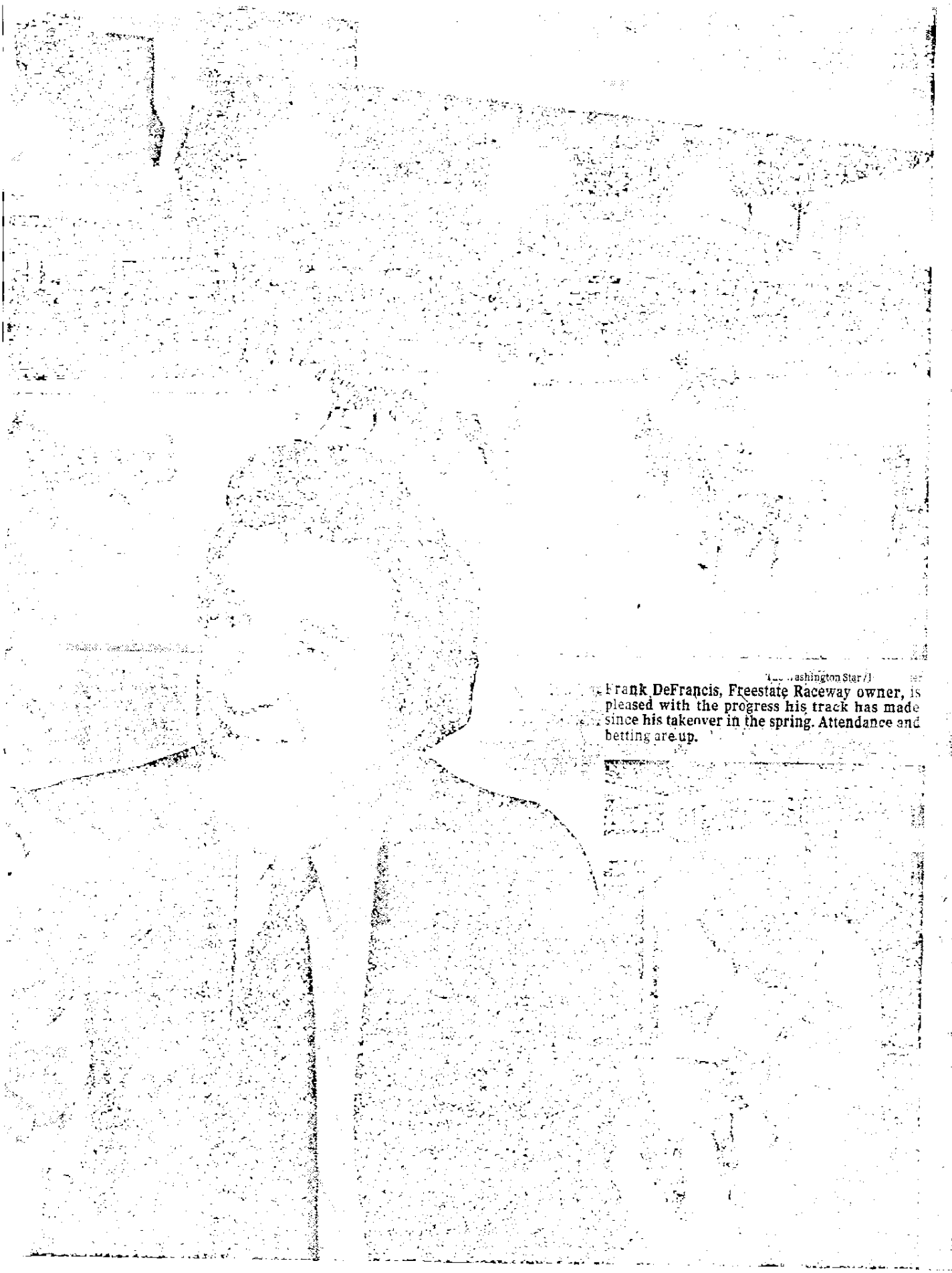

(The Washington Star)

Frank DeFrancis, Freestate Raceway owner, is pleased with the progress his track has made since his takeover in the spring. Attendance and betting are up.

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/stmn0004

DeFrancis Has Harnessed A Winner With Freestate

By Jack Mann
Washington Star-Sports Columnist

Strolling through the mutuel area of his elegant clubhouse, Freestate Raceway owner-operator Frank DeFrancis pointed to a plastered section of wall, presumably assaulted by the foot of an aggrieved bettor.

"It's the only one," he said proudly.

There was speculation in June, when DeFrancis began trying to raise his harness track from the fiscal and physical mess left by Laurel Raceway, that appointments like the Florentine hand-cast iron fixtures on the outside of the redwood-trimmed entrance might not last out the 85-day meeting.

But they're still there. "So are the flowers, ferns and shrubs," DeFrancis said happily. "The entire ambience of the clubhouse is intact. Nobody has ripped off one leaf.

"The public response to our operation," he said, "is as pleasing as the figures."

The figures, halfway through Freestate's maiden meeting, showed that the attendance is averaging 4,625, up 4.9 percent over Laurel Raceway's dying season, and the handle is averaging $431,755, up 13.9 percent.

What that means, most significantly, is that anybody who might be looking for an 88-acre site about halfway between Baltimore and Washington to build a stadium, or something like that, will have to look elsewhere. Frank DeFrancis is, for the foreseeable future, hooked on harness racing.

Tonight's feature race at Freestate will be the $25,650 Lord Baltimore Pace, the fourth race on the program. Approximate post time is 9 p.m.

It is, he says simply, and frequently, "the greatest game in town."

DeFrancis has been infected in the same manner and to the same degree as when, as he puts it, he was "bitten by the tsetse fly" of thoroughbred racing.

That was in 1940, when Frank was 13, on the way back from vacation with his father in Laconia, N.H. They stopped to visit a sort of carnival on one side of the road in Salem Depot and Frank noticed many cars turning off on the other side of the road.

They were going into Rockingham Park, that quaint little race track that is now one with Nineveh and Tyre. "My father took me there," DeFrancis recalled. "and as I walked in it seemed like trumpets blared and angels sang. I had discovered horse racing.

That little track was the poor man's Saratoga, and it aged so beautifully. I cried when I heard it burned down."

Frank resolved to own thoroughbreds "as soon as I had two dollars to rub together," which in his case, didn't take long.

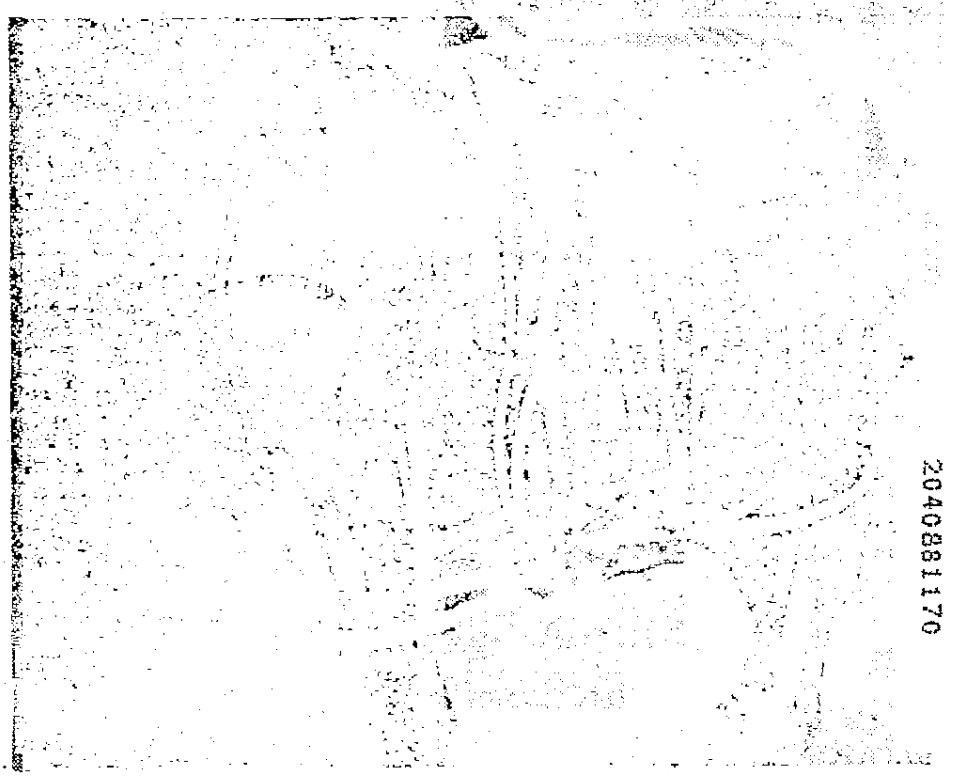
At 24, a couple of years out of Georgetown Law, he took on a client called the Federal Republic of Germany. At 53 he paid $4.8 million for the rundown property that was Laurel Raceway.

The phoenix has not completely risen from the ashes, but its wings are fluttering and DeFrancis, at least, is flying.

"You will see more photo finishes here in one night," he promised a visitor, "than you'd see on a flat track in a week."

One of the principal problems for DeFrancis, with 26 years as a thoroughbred owner — and a one-of-the-boys racetracker — behind him, is ra-

See HARNESSING, D-5



Harness horses are loaded down ... hobbles, which are designed to ke... trotters from breaking into a run.

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/stmn0004

Harnessing Success at Freestate

Continued From D-1

tionalizing that there isn't much difference between the trotters and the flats.

There have been those, like the late columnist Jimmy Cannon, who found the differences striking. "I will not risk my money," Cannon once wrote, referring to the hobbles which keep a harness horse from running, "on any proposition in which the participants are penalized for trying."

"It's a different game," DeFrancis said, "and it isn't. The horse is the basic commodity. The hopes, the ambitions are identical. . . . When a horse rounds the turn the patron has a $2 investment in tens of thousands of dollars worth of horseflesh. . . . There is the sweat of the trainer, the driver's life, limb, talent. . . .

"Really, there wasn't any transition I had to go through."

There is a lingering hint of dichotomy in two of the artifacts in DeFrancis' office. One is a framed copy of Chapter 512 of the Acts of the Legislature, with one of the pens Gov. Harry Hughes used to sign it. It was the law that in effect allowed DeFrancis to take over the Laurel track without all its bad debts and ill will.

The other is a Belmont Park winner's circle picture of Silver Prospector, a gray 3-year-old thoroughbred colt by the super-swift Mr. Prospector. DeFrancis has him at Saratoga this month.

"He's had some top horses ahead of him," Frank said, "and behind him." Silver Prospector was off the board in the Pennsylvania Derby, but ahead of dead-last Temperence Hill, the 7-10 favorite. He was fourth in the Gold Cup at Ak-Sar-Ben. DeFrancis, plainly, loves him.

And he plainly loves Freestate.

"He's trying like hell," said trainer-driver Bob Werkheiser, 37, who has 14 horses at Freestate, including Meadow Rich, a 1:59 1/5 pacer, who won 40 or 50 "heats" (races) last year.

Werkheiser, who also takes his horses to Balmoral in Chicago and Pompano Park in Florida, has raced at the Laurel oval since 1960.

"He's made all the improvements he said he would," Werkheiser said of DeFrancis. "We have a training track now, since they cleared away all the rubbish and undergrowth that accumulated over 15 years.

"There's parking inside the fence for our trailers and trucks. It makes 'em a little safer. Last year some guy must have got mad because he lost a bet; he broke all the windows in (trainer) Dick Sessa's car with a sledge hammer."

The extra parking space was made by clearing out the swampy jungle at the downhill end of the stable area. "There was good drainage, under Route 1," assistant to the president Ed Spector said, "but it got blocked up years ago and they never bothered to clear it out.

"The parking lot," Spector said, "looked like the face of the moon."

That was what DeFrancis saw from the helicopter when he looked at the property, but he also saw what he calls "the finest location of any sports facility in the State of Maryland, literally the midpoint, as Baltimore and Washington grow closer together."

He would have bought the property, DeFrancis said in April, no matter what kind of buildings it had on it. But now he has bought 18 adjoining acres ("at the highest price, $795,000 cash") and plans more substantial improvements to the plant.

"I have put my money where my mouth is," DeFrancis said, "and I have exciting ideas for the future."

"There has always been apathy in harness racing in Maryland," said Ted Burwell, a trainer for six years, "but it seems to be gone. The man has gotten to the realities of racing.

"The track has been tremendous. In other years we never got stone dust added to the surface, so it would wear out and pack down. DeFrancis has brought in truckload after truckload.

"The stable area is sprayed so that we have very little problem with flies. I don't think I've had to spray one of my horses all year.

"It's almost boring," Burwell said, "we have so little to bitch about. At first the track seemed to be a fun thing for him (DeFrancis), but now it's business. He's obsessed with success."

"I am," DeFrancis agreed. "In May you (the Star) had a headline that called me a 'congenial optimist.'

"Now," he said, "I'm a realist. But I'm still congenial."

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/stmn0004